theories and methodologies

Marxist Criticism and Hegel

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THE INTERESTING QUESTION IS IN FACT A TWO-WAY STREET. FAMILIAR ENOUGH, WITH ITS ACCUSATORY HINT OF IDEALISM AND INTELLECTUalizing elitism, is the query, In what sense was Marx a Hegelian? But more tantalizing, more science fictional and counterfactual, is its echoing alternative: In what sense was Hegel a Marxist? The sharing of the dialectic is of course the easy way out, in a speculative dilemma calculated to open up fresh answers and unexpected new problems. I will only take on one of them here—namely, what Hegel might have to tell us about the possibilities, and also the limits, of Marxist literary criticism, an issue that may seem as remote today as literature itself (and the theorizing criticism of it).

Indeed, I will limit my reflections here to an even narrower range of speculation: what Hegel's *Science of Logic* (the so-called greater *Logic*) might have to tell us about Marxist literary criticism. For the greater *Logic* is a kind of abstract template for the concrete content and materials of Hegel's later philosophical studies of art, religion, the history of philosophy, political theory, and even history itself. It is a sequence of abstract categories (in Kant's or even Aristotle's sense), whose internal contradictions generate their more complex successors and which thus range from their beginning in "pure Being" to their climax in the Concept or Notion (the *Begriff*), the Absolute Idea (which, as it turns out, is simply the dialectic, dialectical method itself). This autopoetic self-production of the categories goes through three stages, in a kind of immense spiral (in which all the moments repeat themselves over and over again at higher levels of complexity): "the doctrine of Being," "the doctrine of Essence," and "the doctrine of the Notion (or Concept)." Each one is internally driven by a specific problematic: the first one (Being) by the problems of an externalizing *Verstand*, or "Understanding," and its confusions of quality and quantity; the second (Essence) by the more hermeneutic issue of the relations between inside and outside, and how the appearance of a given phenomenon is to be unmasked as what both conceals and reveals its inner realities; the third, finally

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(the so-called Notion), by the age-old subject-object dilemma, which Hegel believes himself to have solved through the syllogism (which identifies the universal with the particular or singular) and through life as the embodiment of the singular. This is clearly the most contested dimension of Hegel's philosophy, and the most easily qualified as metaphysical or ideological, as vitalist or normative (characterizations true Hegelians would resist).

In my attempt here to illuminate the problems and the dilemmas of a Marxist criticism, I will draw mainly on what I will read as the critical or deconstructive analyses of the second book, or the doctrine of Essence, with its famous central chapter on the "determinations of reflection," which so many have taken rightly or wrongly to be the centerpiece of the exposition of the dialectic.

I have used the word *hermeneutic* to characterize this central section of the *Logic*, for it would seem to deal most centrally with questions of interpretation rather than those of analysis or explanation (and indeed reaches a kind of climax in the discussion of form and content). This is why the hermeneutic has seemed the most appropriate series of categories in terms of which to interrogate literary criticism (and not only the Marxian variety), even though literature and art as such (and even imagination) are never a reference or a source of examples throughout the *Logic*. In fact, the "determinations of reflection" are most accessibly read as a political, rather than a literary, allegory. We begin with Identity as a category, which proves at once to be "the same" as Difference: to say what a thing is is also at once to say what it is not. Yet Difference threatens to disintegrate into the sterile category of Diversity, until both initial categories, Identity and Difference, find their most productive realization in Opposition, which almost at once is unmasked as Contradiction.

At which point, virtually at once, Contradiction "falls to the Ground" (an expression to which I will return), and this transition generates the emergence of the "thing itself" (*die Sache selbst*) or, in other words here, the very reality of the deed, event, or work at issue.

The term *ground* has here indeed two fundamental meanings, an ambiguity that, particularly inasmuch as both meanings are essentially figural, usefully facilitates some properly dialectical slippage between them. The first is of course that of a foundation, and it is clear enough that this sense can serve as a context or source for the elements of the contradiction that finds its basis in "ground." At that point we can observe the emergence of the two terms of the "grounded" and what grounds it, and meaning slowly shifts in the direction of the second acceptation of the Ground term, which is that of a reason or cause. The dialectical reversal then takes place when "ground" itself turns around into a kind of cause and becomes that new category Hegel identifies as Condition. I believe that we must here see the establishment of a new ground in the place of the old one: something a political analogy may make clearer for the whole sequence of categories.

A moment of class self-definition or class consciousness (Identity) leads at once to a class struggle (Difference, Opposition) in which the fundamental contradictions of society (the "ground") are revealed and destroyed and a new "ground" of the social takes their place in classic Hegelian *Aufhebung* (or "sublation"). One state of society supplies the fundamental elements of a social revolution, which then itself modifies its function from a punctual event to the long-term process of social transformation sometimes called "cultural revolution," thereby producing a new state of society, or a new "ground." (Something analogous will take place in literary criticism, where a narrow thematic contradiction—the preconditions of the work—will widen into a sense in which the work stands for a whole moment of history and a whole new perspective of the "spirit of the age," or better still of "culture and society," in Raymond Williams's formulation.)

For literature, however, this moment, in which the critic passes from text to context, is a strategic one, which can rarely be managed gracefully. Indeed, as far as Marxist literary criticism is concerned, I think it can generally be agreed that its most embarrassing move tends to be this (unavoidable) shifting of gears in which we pass from literary analysis to Marxian interpretation and find ourselves obliged to evoke the social and political meaning of the text in terms of the classes, historical contradictions, political and economic background, the conjunctures of forces and ideologies, capitalist alienation, commodification, and ideological occultation and repression, all of which lurk behind the aesthetic curtain and are suddenly unveiled in all their impoverished extraliterary nakedness like the wizard of Oz.

Even so brilliant a dialectician as T. W. Adorno is capable of completing a subtle analysis of the contradictions of a given text with the vaguest of gestures toward "late capitalism" or "verwaltete Gesellschaft." (I myself have sometimes sinned in this direction as well, with the scantiest of references to "commodification" or "finance capital.")

Yet it is a disappointment when we are too precise, as when Carl Schmitt reads *Hamlet* in terms of the foibles of Mary Queen of Scots and the English succession, or too vague and stereotypical, as when we gesture toward capitalist nihilism or *Weltschmerz*: either too little or too much (although I'm not sure which is which, perhaps Schmitt's is also a Hegelian unity of opposites). And it is this unhappy transition that awaits us whether we take the historical (objective) path of interpretation or the cultural (subjective) one: the explanatory code of prerevolutionary social tensions or that of the theory of ideology as such.

I have myself proposed, in a much older work that has never seemed to have made many converts, a method whereby such interpretive codes are differentiated according to the three essential levels of any contextual reference: that of the political—current events, or what Louis Althusser will call the "aleatory conjuncture"; class conflict, or the properly ideological level; and finally the cultural system of the mode of production as such, which for us is essentially commodification (*Political Unconscious*). Still, it is a solution that does not solve, or even paper over, the crucial moment of transition, the embarrassing weak link of the move from text to context.

But let's retrace the process again step by step and, guided by Hegel's stages, return to that interesting moment in which the unity of Identity and Difference is stalled on a possible resolution by way of Diversity (or Multiplicity) before finding a more productive outcome in the category of Opposition. Politically, the moment of Diversity may be identified as that of a liberal multiculturalism that is offered as a political solution: Multiplicity is here to be identified in the variety of identity politics (also, in profoundly Hegelian fashion, characterized as the politics of difference) and as such subject to the radical criticism of theorists as different as Adolph Reed, Jr., Walter Benn Michaels, and Slavoj Žižek. The atomism of Diversity always, on Hegel's view, leads to a "repulsion" from each of these various identities, which gradually reorganize themselves into dichotomous alliances and move toward Opposition as such. Politically, of course, this reorganization is compelled by the increasing primacy of the economic; in literary criticism, however, I would single out humanism, or ethical criticism, as the weakness that dooms critical pluralism to unproductive sterility. Vacuous universals like the human condition, freedom, and the ideal of tolerance always tend to be concealed behind a rhetoric of moral indignation at inequality and purely social injustice as well as the anarchist obsession with power and the state.

As for Opposition, I have often been criticized for assimilating the classical dialectic to the structuralist moment in contemporary philosophy, for which the binary opposition—

"differences without positive terms," as Ferdinand de Saussure put it (166)—is the renewal of the twin dynamics of Hegel and Marx alike and the only outcome for an emphasis on difference that is not a dead end. In literary criticism, this attention to dialectical opposites can alone offer a productive way out of the unsatisfactory alternatives of the insistence on a single meaning or the interminable enumeration of "themes" (phenomena that correspond to Identity and Diversity, respectively, and are central to Hegel's critique of atomism).

This is the moment to introduce what will be my concrete example here—William Gibson's *Neuromancer*—and the properly Hegelian critique of "examples" as degraded and contingent externalizations of the weakness of empiricist notions of "abstraction" may perhaps be implicitly overcome by the historical precedence of science fiction in the postmodern situation today, as well as the current ideological predominance of communication theories, along with the pathbreaking significance of the appearance of this work in the early years of the Reagan era (and indeed in the Orwellian year). *Neuromancer*, indeed, finds its first "Identity" in the notion of cyberspace Gibson is credited with inventing, and the novel's thematic richness offers a happy hunting ground for critics of the most varied methodologies, thereby opening up the space of Diversity (and in fact my own remarks here draw on an earlier essay of mine on this paradigmatic work [*Ancients*]).

The passage from thematic Diversity to the binary of dichotomous Opposition is here simplified for us in an exemplary way by the dual uses of cyberspace that Gibson's novel dramatizes. A first sense of the way in which cyberspace transcends the perceptual capacities of the normal human body is afforded by the great and well-nigh statistical architectures of globalization into which the hacker protagonist enters when he leaves that phenomenological body behind him (as so much "dead meat," in Gibson's language). These are the constructions of totality—as it were the abstractions of abstraction itself—that have taken on a new kind of visual representationality (itself a representation to the second power). Cyberspace thereby responds to a fundamental dilemma of narrative today—how to convey the realities of a global totality, the total system of late or financial capitalism, that is beyond the capacity of any individual mind or experience to grasp, let alone to represent?

This phenomenon would in itself lend Gibson's work a historic significance in the crisis of contemporary representation. But it is accompanied by a second theme, as it were another and radically different sense of the possibilities of cyberspace, and that is what Gibson has chosen to call "simstim," or simulated stimulus. Here it is the sensory capacities of the body itself that are enhanced and projected into the outside real world in such a way that we can grasp the body's far reaches perceptually without moving from our own limited bodily position. If the first kind of operation is an enlargement of abstraction, this one is an intensification of empiricism, comparable to what Walter Benjamin described as the "optical unconscious" of the new media (237), their capacity to open up reaches and dimensions of reality too minute for the old human body to grasp, or to Pascal's two infinities—the human body as the midpoint between the galaxies and the subatomic particles (346)—save that here, once again, unlike the "high art" of Benjamin's and Rosalind Kraus's optical unconscious, this one is also literalized in the mode of science fiction and its "realistic" schematizations.

Now therefore the Identity of cyberspace has been revealed to harbor some fundamental differences, which quickly reorganize themselves into a fundamental opposition: the abstract totalizations of cyberspace in the narrower sense and the sensory realities of simstim, both transcending the capacity of the individual body but in two distinct and even antithetical directions, toward the

unimaginably vast and the unavailably sensory. It is probably clear enough that this opposition can be grasped as a contradiction: each term shares a kind of infinite and can thereby be immediately related to the other, yet the abstract infinity of space is also readily distinguished from its infinitesimality. The crucial point to be made here for those with only a stereotypical idea of Hegel is that the body, Pascal's midpoint, is not in any sense the terms' synthesis. Nor was it, I think, for Pascal, who wanted to dramatize an agonizing dilemma rather than a comfortable and central niche in the universe. But it is also crucial to mark the differences: Pascal's figure unites two extremes in a single plane or dimension, whereas in Gibson this opposition involves the incommensurability of two distinct dimensions that not even the individual body is able to mediate. It is this incommensurability that entitles us to identify this opposition as a contradiction and thereby to move decisively from one of Hegel's categories to another.

The moment of contradiction in the *Logic* is a peculiar one indeed: as one of Hegel's most astute commentators, Béatrice Longuenesse, points out (97), it is odd that so central and omnipresent a concept gets so brief and perfunctory treatment in the *Logic* and then vanishes so rapidly from the sequence. For contradiction then at once passes to Ground—something that might, as has already been shown, mean cause or reason, but which in literary circles we are most familiar with in the embarrassingly neutral yet omnipresent term *context*.

Where do we go from here? In literary interpretation, we have reached a jumping-off point, a cliff from which only allegory seems to offer the outcome. Gibson's opposition would then translate fairly smoothly into that opposition current in late capitalism today that confronts the global and the local as the two irreconcilable extremes of a world market or a finance capital from which the middle term of the national has dropped out: two terms that are alternately negative or positive, depending on whether you are an investment banker or the resident of a small town from which all business has fled. This does seem to me a reasonable use of allegorical interpretation, provided we add some fundamental and indispensable qualifications.

For one thing, as I suggested in passing, this opposition—global and local—is not an analysis of the "current situation," as Lenin might call it, but rather an ideology: a popcultural way of imagining the dilemma, a kind of picture thinking in its own right when it is not the imaginary program of a Utopian solution, in which, as with Kenneth Frampton's critical regionalism, we propose to develop a vigorous local or regional culture that serves as a kind of compensation for the supranational ravages of a world financial system or in which the cultivation of this or that ethnic identity stage attempts to resist the faceless standardization of international business and militarization. Maybe, like regionalism in literature or religious fundamentalism in politics, a third or nationalist way seems to offer a kind of momentary solution, a release from what is otherwise the paralysis of praxis and the helpless passivity of populations caught in the middle.

This is the moment in which, after the dialectic of Identity and Difference leads to Opposition and Contradiction, we confront the unexpected emergence of the category of Ground. Now philosophically this is a very rich word in our two philosophical languages (English and German); or, if you are allergic to German philosophy, it is a most ambiguous one. *Grund* means a reason for something happening: Leibniz uses it and so does Heidegger, and we can see how it would include causality (something most relevant indeed in the English tradition and most notably in Hume) and also how it might have had a whole long previous existence in theology's dealings with God. What are your grounds for divorce? What are your grounds

for making that statement? We can then here also observe the not-so-ghostly presence of the legal system in the multiple appropriations of this word. Hegel also plays a specific neological game with this word, which works nicely in German, where *zu Grunde gehen* is a frequent colloquial expression for going to pieces, collapsing, "to sink, to founder, to be ruined," figuratively, to hit rock bottom and literally to go out of existence. So here at once we confront the negativity lurking in the seemingly positive meaning of *ground*: the difference between "to touch ground" and "to hit the ground" may also helpfully dramatize this productive ambiguity, about which Hegel himself (having first suggested in a letter that he wanted "to teach philosophy to speak German" [*Letters* 107]) said the following: "German has many advantages over other modern languages; some of its words even possess the further peculiarity of having not only different but opposite meanings so that one cannot fail to recognize a speculative spirit of the language in them" (*Science* 32). However shocking such linguistic ambiguities may be in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, they are given a powerful cultural expansion in one of the most famous lines in Goethe's *Faust*, which Hegel must have relished, spoken by Mephistopheles early in the play:

> Denn alles was entsteht
> Ist wert, dass es zu Grunde geht.
> (1.3.201–02)

These lines can be translated as: "Everything that comes into existence has thereby enough value to it that it should go out of existence as well" (or that it should be destroyed). Or you may wish to recall the Anaximander fragment, dear to Heidegger: "and the source for coming-to-be of existing things is also that of their destruction, according to necessity; for they pay a penalty of retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessments of Time" (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 118). Or even Shakespeare: "Thou owest God a death."

But it would be wrong to think of this association of ground with death exclusively in individual terms, for it is also collective and historical. Indeed, one of the most revealing moments in the *Philosophy of History* comes early, in Hegel's account of the Persian empire, where he remarks, in virtually an offhand manner, "The Persians are the first Historical People; Persia was the first Empire that passed away." The chapter in which this line appears had been preceded by evocations of China and India, surely historical par excellence, yet not in the way in which Hegel understands the "historical," for "China and India remain stationary and perpetuate a natural vegetative existence even to the present time" (173). This is surely an astonishing point of view, and to be juxtaposed with the famous linguistic-etymological formulation of *essence*, "Wesen ist was gewesen ist" (*Wissenschaft* 13) 'essence must necessarily be over and done with, must already "have been" to "be" as essence.' (We may note in passing that Marx's much-discussed and scandalous-infamous theory of the timelessness of "Oriental despotism," or more officially the Asiatic mode of production [in the *Grundrisse*], derives at least in part directly from such passages [401].)

But this casts a wholly new light on Hegel's supposedly teleological theory of history, which has customarily been assimilated to a kind of cosmic "bourgeois idea of progress." Even leaving aside the discontinuous leaps from one world spirit to another (in fact rather more analogous to recent theories of the origin of capitalism, leaping from one market to another in search of a space of expansion [Arrighi]), what the caricature has failed to register is Hegel's constitutively retrospective view of history, already implicit in the famous "owl of Minerva," which only flies at dusk (*Elements* 23), and blurted out more openly in his salute to the new world, with its immensities (rivers, mountains, etc.), about

which philosophy (read: Hegel) has nothing to say:

> As a Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for, as regards History, our concern must be with that which has been and that which is. In regard to Philosophy, on the other hand, we have to do with that which (strictly speaking) is neither past nor future, but with that which is, which has an eternal existence—with Reason; and this is quite sufficient to occupy us. (87)

These "eternal existences" are the various forms of each particular "National Genius" or characteristic "national spirit" that make up World History (Hegel, *Philosophy* 53). They form a discontinuous sequence very much in the style of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* rather than the tortuous sequences of the *Logic*; but what is to be stressed, despite the rather loose philosophical language of the above-cited passage, is that if telos there be, then each moment, in fulfilling its telos, must die. The various organic and plant metaphors make clear that for Hegel also, in some literal sense, "ripeness is all," and this achieved and now extinguished essence is destined for *Erinnerung* (memory, but literally interiorization), that is, by Absolute Knowledge. Rebecca Comay has expressed this relation in a striking passage:

> In the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel links Spirit's mobility to a dangerous morbidity. If the Idea must continually relocate, if the torch must be constantly handed on, this is because its incandescence burns, or rather, to shift the metaphor, the poison must continually be expelled; history is the administration of a time-released toxin whose consumption is fatal to those who secrete it. "The life of a people ripens a certain fruit; its activity aims at the complete manifestation of the principle which it embodies. But this fruit does not fall back into the womb of the people that gave birth to it and ripened it; on the contrary, it becomes a bitter drink to it. It cannot leave it alone, for it has an infinite thirst for it; the taste of the drink is its annihilation."
>
> The image gives a startling twist to Hegel's more familiar description of experience as the organic growth of meaning from seed to blossom to fruit and back again. It is actually a small dose of death that is transmitted. The gift becomes, in the present, a kind of poison. To consume the fruit of the present, to experience one's own experience, would entail a mad *jouissance* within the short-circuit of time—at once thought's craving and its ruination. Hegel here essentially defines history as trans-generational trauma: experience is the belated and vicarious experience of the missed experience of the other. (86)

Comay's brilliant language here restores "the labor and suffering of the negative" to Hegel with a vengeance, demonstrating the dialectical identity of positive and negative, flourishing and death, in the presence of Ground as such.

At any rate, this category—which as reason or reasons for being seems a simple enough idea, then later on expanded in the version I have already given it as a general context, background, or even element of a phenomenon—now proves to carry in itself the very seeds of time as such, the "going hence" as well as the "coming hither," the negativity that is the motor force of the universe as well as of Hegel's series of categories. For with this negativity the category itself "comes into being" and "goes thence," and our question now is, How did contradiction pass over into this new category of Ground? Better still, how does contradiction turn out essentially to be the category of Ground? And then after that, how does Ground—the reason for things—turn into a new category, the Condition—the precondition for things and ultimately existence as such?

Our Hegelian reading of the literary text had, in effect, stalled with the reasonable proposition that Gibson has offered us a reflection of one of the fundamental contradictions of late capitalism, the gap between an

overarching and increasingly untouchable world system of financial profit and an individual experience shorn of its habitat and most often reduced, if I may use the term, to "naked life."

What we find at this transitional moment in the *Logic* is that the opposition or contradiction has "gone to ground," has "withdrawn into its ground" (Hegel, *Science* 434). Ground (*Grund*) then opens up, into its own constitutive moments of development, which are those, themselves profoundly literary and hermeneutic, of the oppositions between form and matter and form and content, to which we may also add the somewhat later enumeration, under the category of Appearance, of whole and parts, force and expression, inner and outer, and ultimately of causality as such.

But here already, with the mutation of Ground into Condition, we reach a remarkable event, namely Existence, or the coming into being of the work itself! We may here experience what Adorno, who so frequently compared Hegel's situation and achievement with that of his contemporary Beethoven, identified as the great musical hammer blow of the *Logic*, the grand Hegelian affirmation that "Essence must appear!" (168).

I believe that this astonishing transition from grounds and reasons, themes and contradictions, to existence itself is to be clarified by the interpretive proposal that Jean-Paul Sartre, following Henri Lefebvre's historical work, called "the regressive-progressive method" (51n8). The idea is that, following a number of logical preconditions for the work back in time, we lay in place what had already to be—socially, historically, formally, existentially, or psychologically—before reconstructing the actual production of the thing itself, its emergence into Existence and its Appearance, its reception and meaning for Actuality (another fundamental Hegelian category). This repetition of the categories in regressive and then progressive time is the equivalent, in my opinion, of the great Hegelian spirals where "the same" categories repeat at higher levels of complexity.

But to grasp the pertinence of this contemporary parallel, we must also insist on another feature of the Hegelian categories we have been using here, which have all been expounded in the second book of the *Science of Logic*, "The Doctrine of Essence." Although these categories have often been centrally identified with the dialectic itself, it is important to understand that for Hegel, essence is not the last word in reality but only its subjective logic, which must be completed by the third book, that of the Notion or Concept. In a more Marxist terminology, we must therefore identify the doctrine of Essence with the realm of ideology, reserving the question of objectivity (and, indeed, of universality) for a later discussion. For it is only there that representation and history begin to coincide, and the literary and cultural formal questions become political ones. As for *Neuromancer*, Hegel has usefully warned us against grasping its central opposition in any mimetic spirit. Hegelian abstraction is a process of expansion rather than subtraction and here moves from the local precondition of the work—a social feature among others—to that vaster historical phenomenon of which both text and society are components, revealing the global-local contradiction to be not some representation of reality but rather its ideological symptom, in a situation in which that reality, like the Lacanian Real, is at one and the same time unpresentable and as actual as a beating pulse.

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